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NOW'S THE TIME TO GO WILD

Want to see the Big Country? America's national parks are at their best as winter turns to spring, says Julia Buckley

The names draw you in: Death Valley, Hells Canyon, Alligator Alley, the Devil's Golf Course. Wild America is simply packed with spectacular, cinematic drama. But in summer, the world's best national-parks network is also stuffed with people — and it's often as hot as it is crowded. The solution? Visit when winter shades to spring — fewer people, cheaper rooms, often more clement weather. Go west, young man, and go sharpish.

Surviving Death Valley

As the lowest — and hottest — point in North America, California's spectacular Death Valley boasts summer temperatures that routinely hit the high 40s. With March highs in the mid-20s, you can comfortably walk out onto the exposed Badwater salt flats, point the car down the dirt tracks to the Devil's Golf Course (an expanse of prickly salt pillars) or go for a walk among the epic Mesquite sand dunes without burning your shoes off. **Where to stay:** the large resort at Furnace Creek is where the swanky accommodation lies, but it's pretty far from a rugged desert experience. To get closer to nature, book a simple motel-style room at Stovepipe Wells, bang in the middle of Death Valley. Doubles from £50 (00 1-760 786 2387, escapetodeathvalley.com). **Getting there:** Las Vegas is a 130-mile drive from Death Valley. Fly there from Heathrow with British Airways and Virgin Atlantic from about £650.

The badlands of Zion

With its vast canyon walls obliterating half the sky, Utah's Zion National Park can seem a little forbidding; but add a dusting of snow and it softens into just beautiful. Better still, the

level of snow isn't enough to shut things down completely — though the strenuous hikes up to the canyon

rim are closed in winter, the more leisurely trails are usually open. **Where to stay:** Zion Lodge (the only hotel in the park) knocks its prices down from £100 to £55 B&B during winter. In summer, the lodge is booked up a year in advance, but right now there's availability at a day's notice (303 297 2757, zionlodge.com). **Getting there:** fly to Las Vegas (see above). Zion is a 170-mile drive north.

Hike the Grand Canyon

With those famous red cliffs daubed with what looks like a thick layer of icing, you'll get a different take on the canyon's fabulous vista. Heavy snowfall closes the wild, high-altitude North Rim from October until May, but the South Rim, in Arizona, remains open. Snow is cleared daily from the trails, so you can walk the rim as usual or even hike down to the canyon floor (the snow disappears a couple of hundred feet in). And with the snow acting as a soundproof, it's quiet enough to hear the California condors swinging overhead.

Where to stay: rooms at the six South Rim lodges start at £53 off-season, but you can grab a log cabin a few feet

from the rim at the 1935-built Bright Angel Lodge — gold dust, come summer — from £70 (303 297 2757, grandcanyonlodges.com).

Getting there: it's 230 miles from Phoenix; fly there from Heathrow with BA from £565. And it's 275 miles from Las Vegas (see above).



Utah's forest of stone

Bryce Canyon National Park is a stunning labyrinth of sculpted rock, which really should be world famous. It gets snowy in winter, but embraces the weather. The National Park Service lays on snowshoeing expeditions every weekend, and there's even a monthly full-moon snowshoe hike. Cross-country skiing is also possible — where the fall is deep enough, you can ski right down into the famous spiky Bryce Amphitheater.

Where to stay: the Stone Canyon Inn is a smart little B&B overlooking the canyon. Rooms start at £62, and there's a "buy two nights, stay three" deal until the end of March (866 489 4680, stonecanyoninn.com). **Getting there:** fly to Vegas (see above).

Don't mess with Texas

If you really want to comprehend the scale of the American West, head to

the enormous emptiness of the Big Bend National Park, an 800,000-acre, wildlife-crammed, desert-to-mountain wilderness. It's mind-blowing, but it can be impossibly hot in summer. Winters are generally mild, with temperatures in the mid-20s during the day and dropping sharply at night (so layer up).

Where to stay: the Chisos Mountains Lodge is the only hotel in the park. October to April is peak season, but there's still plenty of availability. Double rooms start at £70 (432 477 2292, chisosmountainslodge.com). **Getting there:** American Airlines flies from Heathrow to Midland (210 miles from the park) from about £490, via Dallas.

Peace in Yosemite



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Visiting California's Yosemite National Park is an all-American pilgrimage, its fabled views drawing hefty crowds in summer. In late winter, it's unrecognisable: stunning and almost empty. The meadows and waterfalls are covered in snow until April, and there's a dedicated ski area, Badger Pass, which is open until the end of March. Group lessons start from £22. If you decide to go it alone, there are 10 runs and 90 miles of cross-country trails to explore.

Where to stay: Yosemite Lodge at the

falls has doubles from £77. A Stay N Play package, including lift passes, equipment rental, a group lesson, ice-skating and tubing sessions, and accommodation, costs from £122 (801 559 4884, yosemitepark.com).

Getting there: it's 210 miles east of San Francisco. Fly there with Virgin Atlantic, United Airlines or BA, from about £460.

Into the Everglades

December to April is actually Florida's dry, high season, so bargains are scarce, but so are mosquitoes in the lush wonder of the Everglades National Park. Kayaking through the mangrove swamps and waterways in winter is fun, rather than a test of endurance. It is also peak time for wildlife — including alligators, bottlenose dolphins, ospreys, crocodiles and manatees.

Where to stay: there are no hotels in the park, and Florida City is the nearest town, but a 30-mile drive south will get you to Key Largo and the fabulous beachfront Largo Lodge. Garden units start at £96, and you can stay in a cottage for £120. The lodge has its own private beach (305 451 0424, largolodge.com).

Getting there: fly to Miami with BA, Virgin, Delta Air Lines, American or United, from about £400.

TRAVEL BRIEF

Airlines: American Airlines (0844 499 7300, americanairlines.co.uk), British Airways (0844 493 0787, ba.com), Delta Air Lines (00 44-871 22

11 222, delta.com), United Airlines (0845 8444 777, unitedairlines.co.uk) and Virgin Atlantic (0844 874 7747, virgin-atlantic.com).

Car hire: expect to pay from about £105 a week for a compact car. Look at Carhire3000 (carhire3000.com), Kayak.co.uk and Auto Europe (0800 358 1229, www.auto-europe.com).



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